

The Lunch Tray's

Guide to Getting Junk Food Out of Your Child's Classroom

by

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Dedication

This guide is dedicated to the many Lunch Tray readers who are working hard, sometimes in the face of strong opposition, to improve their children's school food environment. I've been inspired by and learned so much from each of you over the years and I hope this guide is helpful to you in your continued advocacy.

- Bettina



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My Classroom Junk Food Story

When I started my blog [The Lunch Tray](#) in 2010, my children were six and nine and attending our local public elementary school. And one of my biggest concerns back then was the amount of junk food they seemed to be getting at school on a regular basis.

I'm not militantly anti-sugar or one of those parents determined to keep her kids from ever eating highly-processed snacks. To the contrary, I love taking my kids out for ice cream or indulging in cupcakes from our favorite bakery, and I'm fine with putting a sweet in their packed lunches now and then. But I do feel that kids should eat healthy food most of the time and I was trying my best to keep their consumption of junk food to a reasonable minimum.

Yet once my children entered pre-school and, later, elementary school, it started to seem that even that modest goal was being thwarted at school. My kids would come home and turn down the healthy after-school snack I'd prepared because they'd just eaten donut holes or cupcakes to celebrate a classmate's birthday. Because of the large size of their classes, birthdays were celebrated a few times a month -- even kids with summer birthdays would sometimes bring in sweets near the end of the year in order to have their turn.

Even more troubling for me, though, was the unexpected use of candy as a reward at school. In second grade, my son reported happily that for every correct math answer, his teacher was giving him M&Ms. My daughter's reward for good behavior in the third grade was to redeem coupons at a "treasure box" loaded with candy bars. In fifth grade, my son's teacher announced that good behavior would be rewarded with "brownie points" which students could redeem for - you guessed it - actual brownies!

And then there were the classroom holiday parties, which always seemed to be an occasion for an all-out sugar orgy. My kids would heap their paper plates full of every kind of dessert imaginable and then come home far too stuffed for dinner -- and predictably irritable once the sugar high wore off. Taking the orgy theme to its fullest, each year my daughter's "Name that Book" team would celebrate the

end of the competition with burgers, fries and shakes at a local diner *and* a later “Junk Food Party” for which kids were encouraged to bring in and eat the junkiest food they could find.

I regularly shared my concerns about all of this on The Lunch Tray, starting with [a post](#) about classroom birthday cupcakes on just my second day of blogging. In the ensuing years, I wrote [many more](#) posts about classroom junk food, but the issue really came to a head in the spring of 2012.

By this time, my daughter was in middle school and had a language teacher well known among students for handing out 12-oz. cans of Coke and full-sized bags of gummi bears for good performance. In



fact, it wasn't unusual for a student to receive *both* rewards on a single day - 105 grams of sugar! Then one day my daughter asked this teacher for permission to go to the water fountain and instead, without asking her, he simply turned to his mini-fridge and handed her a can of Coke. I was shocked and recounted the story on The Lunch Tray ([“My Daughter Asks for Water, Her Teacher Hands her a Coke”](#)).

While I was still reeling from that episode, the next day my son came home from elementary school and told me he'd won a school-wide contest for which he was given a jumbo-sized Hershey bar, the size you can buy at a movie theater, which I later learned comprised four adult servings of chocolate, with a total of 88 grams of sugar and 48 grams of fat.

Even worse, it had also been a standardized testing day and every child had been given, without any notice to the parents, a Capri Sun juice pouch and some hard peppermint candies in hopes that the sugar and peppermint would keep children alert during the exams.

That did it.

The Lunch Tray's "Food-in-the-Classroom Manifesto"

I was so frustrated that the next day I sat down at my laptop and quickly pounded out what I called my "[Food-in-the-Classroom Manifesto](#)," outlining ten reasons why school classrooms should be food-free.

Here's what I wrote:

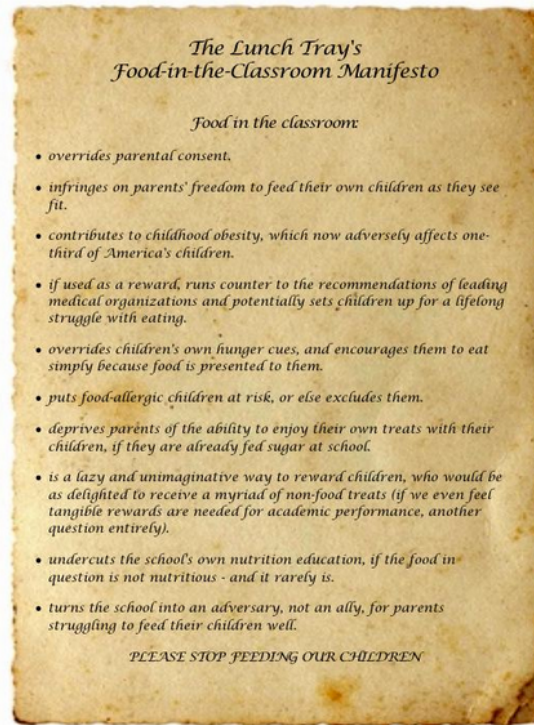
"Food in the classroom:

- Overrides parental consent;
- Infringes on parents freedom to feed their own children as they see fit;
- Contributes to childhood obesity, which now adversely affects one in three of America's children;
- If used as a reward, runs counter to the recommendations of leading medical organizations and potentially sets children up for a lifelong struggle with eating;
- Overrides children's own hunger cues, and encourages them to eat simply because food is presented to them;
- Puts food-allergic children at risk, or else excludes them;
- Deprives parents of the ability to enjoy their own treats with their children, if they are already fed sugar at school;
- Is a lazy and unimaginative way to reward children, who would be as delighted to receive a myriad of non-food treats (if we even fell tangible rewards are needed for academic performance, another issue entirely);
- Undercuts the school's own nutrition education, if the food in question is not nutritious – and it rarely is;

- Turns the school into an adversary, not an ally, for parents struggling to feed their children well.

PLEASE STOP FEEDING OUR CHILDREN!”

I pasted the text onto a sheet of “virtual parchment” and urged parents to “copy it, share it, nail it to the schoolhouse door.”



In the intervening two years, my manifesto has been [downloaded](#) by parents all over the country, many of whom have written to tell me that it's been a useful conversation starter with their school's teachers and administrators.

I'm gratified that this list, dashed off in the heat of anger, has been so widely circulated, but I also realize that it isn't enough to just outline the reasons why junk food has no place in classrooms. Parents need concrete advice on how to address this problem and it's my goal to provide that advice and other useful resources in this guide.

Why Classroom Junk Food Is Not Affected by the “Smart Snacks” Rules

Before we begin, let’s take a moment to talk about new federal rules which went into effect in the 2014-15 school year regulating “competitive” food and beverages. These are the snacks and drinks (apart from the school meal) sold to children through school stores, vending machines, cafeteria “a la carte” lines, school fundraisers and other on-campus outlets during the school day. Commonly referred to as the “[Smart Snacks in School](#)” rules, these new regulations have greatly improved the nutritional profile of these foods and beverages:



Image source: USDA.gov

Many parents understandably assume that the Smart Snacks rules extend to junk food provided to children in the classroom. However, the operative word in the paragraph above is “sold.” That is, in order to be covered by the Smart Snacks regulations, the food or drink must be *offered for sale*.

Foods and drinks which are simply given to children for free – as is almost always the case within the classroom setting – are unfortunately not addressed by these new rules. Classroom food is, however, mentioned in proposed (i.e., not yet final) [USDA rules](#) governing district wellness policies, discussed more fully at the end of this guide.

Best Practices for Advocacy

Let's also take a moment to talk generally about how best to approach fellow parents, teachers, principals and other decision-makers when it comes to the issue of junk food in classrooms.

Keep Your Cool

In my almost-five-years of blogging at The Lunch Tray, I've learned one thing with certainty: the feeding of children is a deeply emotional topic for most people. It touches on our differing parenting philosophies, how we ourselves were fed as kids – even our socioeconomic status. Adults may also be facing their own struggles with obesity or overeating, which can create painful sensitivities when someone questions how they feed the children in their care.

Complicating the matter further is the fact that your definition of “healthy” food may differ dramatically from someone else's. We all have varying levels of nutrition education and our own particular set of nutrition concerns: some parents worry about artificial ingredients or GMOs, for example, while others trust that anything in the food supply must be safe. Every day we read about some new and supposedly better way of eating, whether vegan or Paleo or low-carb or gluten-free, and even the nation's leading experts can't seem to agree on the ideal American diet. All of this confusion is compounded by the processed food industry, which is heavily invested in making health claims for its products. It's no wonder, then, that one parent might pick up a 100-calorie bag of “100% whole grain” Baked Doritos and think it's an excellent choice for her children, while another might regard it as Satan's own snack food.

I mention all of this not to discourage you from advocating firmly for your own beliefs, but to encourage you to be your most polite and tactful self when doing so. This can be quite challenging when *you* feel infringed upon by someone feeding junk food to your child without your consent. But you'll likely get further in achieving your goals if you keep your understandable anger in check, remembering that the person on the other side of the discussion may see the issue

very differently. You may also face the tricky task of first having to educate that person about nutrition – even though he or she never asked for your knowledge in the first place – and in a way that doesn't seem judgmental or condescending.

It's a tall order, so proceed delicately.

Start From the Bottom Up

When you're concerned about a food-related issue at your child's school, you might be tempted to take the matter "straight to the top," especially if you happen to have a good personal relationship with a principal or school board member. Even if this is the case, however, it's still better to start with the person closest to the issue, whether that's the teacher handing out candy rewards or the fellow parent who is organizing a junk-food-filled class party. This person may ultimately refuse to budge, but at least you won't have created unnecessary additional resentment by going over their head, perhaps embarrassing them with their boss, before giving them a chance to work with you.

Start From Common Ground

Before confronting a teacher or fellow parent, try to remember that most people have good intentions when feeding kids, even when they're feeding them junk food. For example, the language teacher who astonished me by giving my daughter Coke instead of letting her go to the water fountain likely had good motives: he probably thought he was being a nice guy, giving a student an unexpected "treat." Similarly, parents who bring junk food into the classroom may be completely unaware of the nutritional concerns associated with those foods, or they may not see the big picture of a child's diet and instead regard their contribution in a vacuum, as "just one treat."

So start off with the assumption that both you and the person you're confronting at least share the common ground of caring about children, even if you might feed them very differently. This will help set a constructive tone for the conversation that's more likely to lead to consensus.

Have Solutions in Mind

Every time your child is fed junk food in class, there's an underlying need that's being met in some way.

A teacher is having trouble keeping order among her restless second graders, so she entices them with sweets to get them to behave. A principal is worried about standardized test scores, so she arranges for kids to consume juice and candy on testing day. Parents are asked to sign up to provide snack for the entire class but the idea of washing and cutting up fruit seems daunting, so they fall back on junk food packaged items.

No matter the scenario, you'll go a long way toward changing the status quo if you can (a) figure out the underlying need that's being filled by junk food and (b) come to the table with a list of healthful alternatives. So, in the first example, the teacher might better control her fidgety second graders by giving them fun "movement breaks" throughout the day to let them burn off excess energy. The principal worried about test scores may not know that protein- and fiber-rich snacks like cheese sticks served with whole grain crackers will likely give children a more sustained energy boost than candy and juice. Harried parents who are asked to volunteer snack can be given lists of readily available, healthful, no-prep foods like clementines, whole grain pretzels, popcorn, cheese sticks, dried fruit and more. The list could even include local stores in the area which carry such items, to make shopping easier.

In other words, ranting about junk food in the classroom may feel good but it's usually not enough to create change. Coming prepared with solutions shows you're a team player who sincerely wants to make a teacher or school's life easier -- but without sacrificing kids' health in the bargain.

Be Prepared to Take the Laboring Oar, At Least At First


It may go without saying that if you're going to be the moving force behind, for example, healthier Valentine's Day parties, you may also be the parent staying up until midnight putting heart-shaped melon pieces on little skewers. In other words, if you're going to agitate for change, you also need to be willing to do whatever it takes — organizing other parents, passing out healthy snack lists, etc. - to bring about your classroom food goals, at least at first.

Hopefully, however, a new, healthier classroom ethos will catch on and you and your allies won't be the only ones pitching in.



Don't Be a Fruitcake!

A friend of mine gave me the card below, which encourages parents to band together to improve public education.



PARENTS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF HOUSTON
Organizing, Training & Engaging Parents

Collaboration Counts

Author Unknown

If you think that you alone cannot do much to improve your school, you are probably right. But if you collaborate with other parents and organizations you can make a difference. There is strength and power in numbers.

1 parent	=	A fruitcake
2 parents	=	A fruitcake and a friend
3 parents	=	Trouble makers
5 parents	=	“Let’s have a meeting”
10 parents	=	“We’d better listen”
25 parents	=	“Our dear friends”
50 parents	=	A powerful organization

info@ppshouston.org | www.ppshouston.org

But this message of “strength in numbers” is equally applicable to the goal of eliminating junk food from the classroom:

The more like-minded parents you can find to support your efforts, the more likely you are to be successful.

Finding those other parents isn’t always easy, though, especially if you’re new to a school. You can start by striking up casual conversations at drop-off or pick-up to sound out whether fellow

parents share your feelings about junk food at school. You might be surprised to find that many parents do feel the same way but have been keeping quiet about it, assuming they had no choice but to accept the status quo. You can also raise the issue at a PTA meeting to see if you can find support there. Some PTAs actually have established wellness committees, which of course would be a great source for potential allies (more on such committees at the end of this guide). A few parents I've talked to have even circulated online surveys, using free services like [Survey Monkey](#), to assess the views of parents on a wider scale and to drum up support.

Don't forget that you might also find allies at school apart from fellow parents. In some cases, a principal is health-conscious and is simply unaware of the junk food practices going on in his or her school's classrooms. In other cases, it's the teachers who dislike junk food because of its adverse affect on students' behavior, lost instructional time and the sanitation problems it can create in their classrooms. The school nurse, who often sees firsthand the effects of children's unhealthy diets, could also be a potential ally.

In the end, you may have to go it alone. But that should be your last resort, not your first plan of action.

Set Realistic Goals for *Your* Community

While parents should feel free to advocate for the healthiest classroom environment possible, there may come a point when you hit the limits of what your particular community will accept. Here's what I mean:

You might live in a health-conscious, progressive city and/or your children might attend a school (public or private) in which the parent community is well educated about nutrition -- or at least open to nutrition education. Or you might be like one Lunch Tray reader who recently wrote to me in despair. In the small, rural area in which she lives, the school is awash in junk food for every occasion, from parties to fundraisers. Overweight children in her community are generally looked upon as "healthier" than children of normal weight (who are called "pencil-necked" or "beanpole"), and a fellow PTA member once literally told her, "We don't care about nutrition!"

If you live in the former environment, asking fellow parents to bring in only organic, locally-grown fruits and vegetables for birthdays might be met with excited enthusiasm. In the latter environment, it might get you run out of town by an angry mob.

So if your school, for whatever reason, seems to be mired in the junk food Stone Age, you may need to scale back your initial goals. For example, instead of asking an indifferent or hostile principal to ban all junk food for birthday celebrations, you might start by asking if all children with a birthday in a given month could celebrate on the same day. And instead of pitching your proposal solely as a dietary issue, which could be seen (unfairly, of course)



as “elitist” or judgmental, you might want to emphasize other, non-food factors, such as the instructional time that’s lost if, several times a month, a teacher has to pass out treats, wait for children to eat them, and then clean up after them.

Finally, if you do live in a community that’s stubbornly resistant to change, don’t beat yourself up about the slow pace of your progress. Junk food in the classroom is symptomatic of much larger societal forces at work, and even the smallest improvements can rightly be viewed as a big wins.

How Junk Food Is Used In Classrooms

Now let's look at the specific ways in which children are usually given junk food in class and address them in turn:

As an individual student reward, handed out by the teacher for good behavior or academic performance;

As a large-scale group reward (e.g., a pizza or ice cream sundae party) for meeting some class-wide goal, such as selling the most items for a fundraiser or collecting the most Box Tops;

As a teaching tool or manipulative, as when a teacher uses M&M's for counting games or has children build objects out of candy or sugary cereal;

At classroom parties, often held in honor of Valentine's Day, Halloween, the winter holidays and/or the end of school;

To celebrate an individual child's birthday, and brought in by the child's parent(s);

For morning or afternoon snack, either provided by the school or by parents on a sign-up basis; and

To improve performance on standardized tests, as when children are given juice, mints or other snacks in hopes that it will keep them alert.



Kids and Sugar

Each of the foregoing uses of junk food in classrooms may require a different approach from parent advocates, but in almost all cases the food in question tends to be high in sugar. So it's useful for concerned parents to have at their fingertips the prevailing scientific guidance about children and sugar consumption.

For both children and adults, eating too much sugar can have serious health consequences including unhealthy weight gain, high blood pressure, diabetes and high cholesterol. Therefore, according to the [American Heart Association](#), children should consume no more than 3-4 teaspoons of "added sugar" a day, while teenaged girls should have no more than 5 teaspoons and teenaged boys no more than 8-9 teaspoons daily.

"Added sugar" means sugar that doesn't occur naturally in a food but instead is added by a manufacturer. If a product doesn't contain significant amounts of fruit or milk (two foods which naturally contain sugars), then its sugar is likely added.



Unfortunately, as of this writing, Nutrition Facts boxes don't distinguish between added sugar and naturally occurring sugar, although the FDA [has proposed](#) changing Nutrition Facts to disclose this information. In the meantime, though, you can use the total sugar figure as a reasonable guide, especially in junk food.

Since Nutrition Facts boxes use grams instead of teaspoons as their unit of measurement, you'll also need to know that 4 grams of sugar equals one teaspoon. So, put another way:

An elementary school-aged child should have no more than around 12-16 grams a day of added sugar in his or her diet.

With that information in mind, even modest sugary classroom treats no longer seem so benign. For example, did you know that:

- Just **six Jolly Rancher candies** handed out as a classroom reward have [22 grams](#) of added sugar, exceeding the maximum recommended daily limit for elementary-aged children by 6 grams?
- **One vanilla birthday cupcake** could have [34 grams](#) of sugar, which is over twice that daily limit?
- One **Capri Sun juice pouch** ([16 grams](#) of sugar) and **five hard peppermint candies** ([15 grams](#) of sugar) given to kids on standardized testing days collectively exceed twice the daily limit?



And none of these examples take into account the many other sources of sugar in the average American child's diet, such as sugar-sweetened cereals, muffins, chocolate milk, "fruit" snacks or sports drinks. Even savory products like pasta sauce and salad dressing may contain unexpectedly high levels of sugar.

Most teachers and principals aren't even aware that there *is* a recommended daily limit on children's sugar consumption and this information alone, when juxtaposed against the amount of sugar in typical classroom junk food, may well be persuasive to them.

To prepare for that conversation, here are some other useful sources of information on added sugar and kids:

- The “[Added Sugar Fact Sheet](#)” from Rudd ‘Roots Parents;
- [Sugar 101](#) from the American Heart Association; and
- [Be a Sugar Detective](#) and the [Sugar Detective Spy Sheet](#) from Yale Health.
- Mayo Clinic, “[Kids and Sugar - The Good, the Bad and the Ugly](#)”
- *Parents* magazine, “[Sugar Shock](#)”



Food as a Reward

Now let's turn to the use of junk food as a reward, whether for a single child or an entire class. Putting aside the nutritional profile of the food in question, many parents find the use of junk food rewards especially troubling because it creates an undesirable emotional connection between achievement and unhealthy food. So what motivates teachers and schools to use it?

Junk food is given as a reward because it's *easy*. It's cheap, readily available, usually requires no preparation or refrigeration and, most importantly, it's a crowd-pleaser. We're all hard-wired to crave [salt](#), [sugar](#) and [fat](#) and junk food delivers those three ingredients in spades. So it's actually understandable that when thinking about easy, surefire



ways to reward children, a teacher or principal might resort to using junk food.

Also, the amount of junk food or candy handed out as a reward tends to be small – a few Jolly Ranchers here, a mini-sized chocolate bar there. Or, in the case of classroom-wide pizza or

sundae rewards, such events don't occur very often each year.

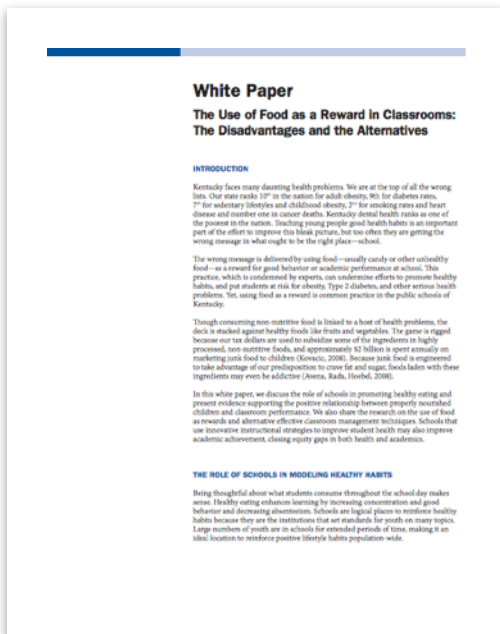
Accordingly, teachers and principals often dismiss any complaints about junk food rewards and concerned parents may be made to feel silly for making fuss about it.

But the use of food as a reward can cause real and lasting harm that goes well beyond the small amount of sugar a child consumes at any given time. Research shows that this practice may actually increase children's overall desire for unhealthy foods, cause overeating, make children more likely to develop eating disorders, and create a lifelong, unhealthy emotional connection with food. Many teachers and principals are unaware of these studies, however, so it's especially important for parents who object to the practice to be armed with facts and expert authority.

Fortunately, it's now easy to find in one place all of these talking points. My blogging colleague Casey Hinds of [US Healthy Kids](#), along with Dr. Alicia Fedewa of University of Kentucky, College of Education and Anita Courtney, M.S., R.D., of Tweens Nutrition and Fitness Coalition, have created an incredibly helpful "[white paper](#)" on [food rewards in classrooms](#).

In this white paper you'll find all of the prevailing scientific research arguing against the use of food as a reward as well as a chart showing every leading medical organization which discourages the practice (including the Mayo Clinic and the American Academy of Pediatrics, among others). The white paper also includes guidance for schools on

how to manage behavior in classrooms without relying on food rewards, as well as a list of useful resources to support that goal.



Another great resource is the Center for Science in the Public Interest's paper, "[Constructive Classroom Rewards: Promoting Good Habits While Protecting Children's Health](#)." In addition to setting forth similar arguments against the use of food as rewards, CSPI offers a lengthy list of non-food rewards teachers can use instead, such as granting children

special privileges (going first, extra recess), trumpeting their accomplishment with special recognition, or even just old-fashioned praise from the teacher.

This [alternative rewards list](#) from the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, as well as [this one](#) from Action for Healthy kids, may also be helpful.

Use of Junk Food as a “Manipulative”

In the context of classroom instruction, a “manipulative” is an item given to students to support hands-on learning, usually for math. Common manipulatives are wooden blocks, marbles, toothpicks or coins, but they can also include pieces of candy and sugar-sweetened cereals like Froot Loops.

Here’s what one [online resource](#) for math teachers has to say about the latter:

One of the most fun (and least expensive) types of manipulatives you can use to teach math concepts to your kids is candy or cereal. There is a natural attraction and fascination for children in playing with (and learning from) candy. Just the novelty of candy being part of a lesson (not to mention eating it at the end of the lesson) is enough to hold the attention of most children.



But while some teachers might like the “attraction” and “fascination” created by junk food manipulatives, parents often dislike them for all the same reasons as junk food rewards: this use of junk food unnecessarily increases kids’ overall daily sugar consumption and also encourages kids to eat when they’re not hungry.

If your child’s teacher frequently uses sugary foods as manipulatives, the information shared above on children’s recommended sugar consumption will be useful to you. You might also come prepared with lists of colorful and fun manipulatives that don’t cost more than candy, such as inexpensive buckets of colorful buttons of varying shapes and sizes (available for just a few dollars at teacher supply stores.)

Classroom Parties

Although they tend to be held only a few times a year, the foods and beverages served at classroom parties are often loaded with sugar and artificial food dyes. Worse, these parties usually celebrate Halloween, Valentine's Day and the winter holidays, all occasions on which children may eat lots of extra sugar *outside* of school. That's why some parents regard class parties as an unwelcome junk food double-whammy for their kids - but it doesn't have to be that way!

First, find out if your school or district sets a maximum number of days per school year for classroom celebrations and/or if nutritional guidelines for such celebrations are already in place. Look for this information in your school's handbook, if one exists, or in your district's wellness policy (more on the latter at the end of this guide.) If your school or teacher is exceeding the maximum number of parties and/or not following the nutritional standards, it's of course very helpful to be able to point to a written authority to help change these practices.



Second, using the information on kids and sugar provided earlier in this guide, see if you can build a coalition of parents interested in hosting healthier classroom parties. These celebrations don't have to completely eliminate sweet treats (if that's a sticking point for some parents), but they can offer children an array of much healthier foods and drinks to choose from.

And the good news is, you don't have to come up with ideas for healthy classroom celebrations on your own. I'm continually amazed by the creativity of parents and bloggers in coming up with fun, easy and healthful items for classroom holiday parties.

For example, check out Sally Kuzemchak of [Real Mom Nutrition's healthy Halloween ideas](#) (pictured on the prior page), which are adorable but don't require Martha Stewart-levels of dedication in the kitchen. Or take a look at this [great list](#) of imaginative, heart-shaped healthy Valentine's Day treats from Organic Authority. For general classroom parties (not necessarily holiday-themed), check out PBS Kitchen Explorers' list of [Healthy Treats for Class Celebrations](#) (created by the [Six O'Clock Scramble's](#) Aviva Goldfarb) and [Healthy School Celebrations](#) from the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

In fact, there are *so many* great ideas out there for healthy classroom party treats, the easiest way for me to share them is by referring you to The Lunch Tray's [Pinterest page](#). There you'll find entire boards devoted exclusively to healthy classroom party ideas, grouped by specific holiday and with new pins added frequently.



Finally, I want to mention the [Healthy Classrooms Initiative](#) created by blogger Stacy Whitman of [School Bites](#). When Stacy became fed up with the amount of junk food in her children's school, she didn't just focus on her children's individual classrooms. Instead she

thought big, teaming up with a local registered dietitian to create an entire program to get junk food out of classrooms throughout the district.

The Healthy Classrooms Initiative provides all teachers and staff with an initial 30-minute presentation on healthy eating, along with specific recommendations for food to be served in the classroom, including classroom celebrations. Among the resources Stacy created are a Healthy Classroom info sheet, a letter to parents explaining the program (in English and Spanish), classroom sign-up sheets and more. Many of these documents are likely to be useful as you attempt to "clean up" your own school's classroom celebrations.

Classroom Birthday Treats

My Birthday Treat Story

When my children were in preschool through the early years of elementary school, I always sent in cupcakes for their birthdays. It was clearly “the thing to do” among my fellow parents and, besides, it seemed like a harmless and fun way to make my kids feel special.

Over time, though, my feelings started to change. My daughter might pass up her favorite dinner because she’d had birthday donut holes and juice that afternoon. I’d have to scrub bright blue food dye off my son’s face, even though, in general, our family didn’t eat many



artificially colored foods. I began to feel annoyed but I still continued to take the classroom birthday treat custom in stride.

Ironically enough, what finally tipped me over the edge wasn’t an opposition to sweets but a *love* of sweets.

In our family, Friday night has always been our designated dessert night and we enjoy it thoroughly. In fact, when my kids were young, being able to choose the Friday dessert was one of the rewards we offered to encourage good behavior. But on those Fridays when my kids had celebrated a birthday at school, I either had to scrap our beloved weekly tradition or let my kids eat an alarming amount of sugar in a single day. Neither was an appealing option, and I started to feel quite put out.

That's when it finally hit me: making your child feel special with a classroom treat is lovely for your child, but it infringes on the rights of other parents. Their concerns might range from life-threatening food allergies to religious dietary restrictions to worry about their child's weight, but no matter what the issue -- or how much you might agree or disagree with it -- those parents should be able to feed their kids as they wish.

I decided then and there that I'd no longer send in classroom birthday treats for my kids, even if it *was* "the thing to do."

But Cupcakes = Love!

On The Lunch Tray, no issue generates more controversy than the idea of banning school birthday treats. Heated discussions erupt in the comments section, sometimes topping 100 comments per post, and I've even felt the need to write lengthy follow-up posts to address the arguments of my harshest critics (E.g., ["A Passionate Dad Defends In-Class Birthday Treats, and I Respond"](#) and ["In-Class Birthday Treats: A Reader Says My Kids Just Need the 'Backbone' to Resist."](#))



But these angry responses aren't surprising. Providing sweet treats on a birthday is a hallowed tradition in our society and viewed as a pure expression of parental affection. Some parents worry that *not* sending in sugary treats will seem somehow negligent or make their child feel unloved. So be warned: getting parents to rethink this practice can be quite challenging, and you'll need to be prepared for some at least some opposition if you take on this issue at your child's school.

Who to Approach and What to Ask For

In some schools, the birthday treat custom is at the teacher's discretion and in others there's a school-wide policy set by the principal. (Your district may also have a policy about birthday treats; more on that at the end of this guide.)

Start by approaching your teacher. You may find to your surprise that he or she actually would *love* to end the sugary birthday treat tradition because of the mess it creates, the lost instructional time and the mood swings it can cause in some children. For example, the day after I published my Food-in-the-Classroom Manifesto, I shared several teachers' comments about it in "[Food in the Classroom: Teachers Speak Out](#)." Here's what one exasperated teacher had to say about birthday treats:

I have had parents go to the principal to complain about me because I absolutely refused a Costco sized sheet cake and two liters of Coke. The parent brought no plates or serving utensils for me, and I have learned from experience that to carve up a sheet cake into 28 pieces and pour 28 cups of soda takes almost 45 minutes from start to finish and then the clean up process as well.

I physically cringe when I see all this junk arrive. First, the children see this bounty arrive and then proceed to ask about it all day long. "When are we going to eat cake?" becomes the mantra for the entire day. I'll be in the middle of a math lesson and a child will raise their hand to ask, "Is it time for cake?"! Because I do not want to have 28 sugar-crazed children in my room, I save this stuff for literally the last 20 minutes of the day.

But if your teacher is either resistant to change or says the matter is out of his or her hands, then approach the principal.

In both cases, there are several different options for which you can advocate (provided they don't conflict with your district wellness policy, discussed at the end of this guide). You could suggest that birthdays be celebrated:

- With sugary treats, but only **once a month** in honor of all classmates with birthdays in that month;
- With only with “**healthy**” **food** (as that term is defined for parents with a list of acceptable items);
- With **non-food treats** brought in by parents (trinkets, etc.) or **non-food activities** (games, stories) arranged by a parent;
- or by **non-food privileges** granted by the teacher or school (such as allowing the birthday child to wear a special crown, sit at the teacher's desk, or choose the story to be read aloud that day.)

In my opinion, the latter option is ideal. Putting aside nutrition and allergy issues, not all parents can afford to buy food or trinkets for an entire class. With non-food privileges, all children are made to feel special -- without harming their health and at absolutely no cost to parents.

Responding to Opposition

Whether you're discussing the birthday treat issue with the principal, a teacher or fellow parents, there are several arguments which are likely to be raised against you, in one form or another. Here are the main themes I've encountered over the years and some suggested responses:

“But it’s just a little treat. No one gets fat from one cupcake!”

- Believe it or not, just one cupcake exceeds a child’s recommended daily intake of added sugars -- and most kids already eat far too much sugar as part of their regular, daily diet.
- Many parents object to classroom treats even apart from the excess sugar and calories. The most serious concerns relate to rising rates of life-threatening food allergies, and for that reason alone we ought to re-think this tradition. But some parents may also be concerned about other ingredients in your cupcake, like gluten or artificial food dyes.
- One treat is no big deal, that’s true. But if you look at the big societal picture, our kids are eating far too much junk food on a regular basis, as borne out by current, alarming rates of childhood obesity. We shouldn’t add to the problem at school.
- When everyone brings in that “one treat,” it really adds up! If 20 children bring in cupcakes this year, that’s 6,000 extra calories per child per year (20 x [300 calories](#)). Multiply that figure by six years of elementary school and, assuming a pound of fat equals [3,500 calories](#), a child could theoretically gain over ten extra pounds from birthday cupcakes alone! And even if a child compensates for the cupcake by eating less later in the day, that means he or she is forgoing healthier food for a junk food, which is itself problematic.

“But I just want to make my child feel special!”

- There are so many ways to make a child feel special without food treats! (More on that below.) In fact, since birthday treats have become the norm, a non-food treat is likely to be far more meaningful and memorable to your child.

“Bans on birthday treats are a ‘nanny state’ intrusion on my freedom. Mind your own business and don’t tell the rest of us what to do!”

- Actually you and I are in perfect agreement! You feel other people shouldn’t interfere with how you feed your child and I’m asking for the exact same thing. You can feed your child cupcakes off campus or include one in his or her school lunch. But when you send them into the classroom, then you’re trampling on *my* freedom.

“Well, then, just tell your kid to not eat my cupcakes!”

- I could do that, but is that really the fairest solution? You can serve your cupcakes *anywhere*, but my child has no choice but to be in the classroom. It’s just like smoking in an elevator. No one says you can’t light up, we just ask that you do it elsewhere because the rest of the passengers can’t escape your second-hand smoke.
- Emerging research in the fields of behavioral economics, social psychology and neuroscience has [demonstrated](#) that even adults have an extremely hard time overcoming the external cues that encourage junk food consumption, and that’s particularly true when they’re feeling tired or have just engaged in challenging mental tasks.

So imagine how much harder it is for children – who are naturally far more impulsive than adults – to overcome those cues, especially during a long, tiring school day. Isn’t it more considerate of you serve your cupcakes off campus, rather than pit a young child’s weak self-control against a temptation that even many adults have a hard time resisting?

- Along those lines, here's what one teacher had to say on The Lunch Tray about whether it's realistic to tell children to "just say no" to classroom treats:

I cringe when [a student's birthday cake] arrives because I myself have a sweet tooth and even when I stand there and tell myself that I will not eat that, I will not eat that, under no circumstances am I going to eat that...I almost always crack and eat the cake. 😞 I have learned for myself that the best way for me to eat healthy is the total removal of all temptation. Now I am a 40 year old woman and have a hard time refusing the cake, so really, what are the odds of a child saying no? We can teach our children to eat healthy so they have healthy bodies and minds, but cake is yummy, and temptation combined with seeing all the other kids eating will result in our kids cracking every time. . . .

Ideas for Non-Food Classroom Birthday Treats

Once I made the decision to no longer send in birthday treats, I was faced with a dilemma: what could I do instead that would still make my child feel special and the class would also enjoy?

As I often do when faced with these sorts of questions, I turned to my wonderful Lunch Tray readership ([“Don't Make Me Eat My Words: A Plea for Help from TLT Readers.”](#)) To my delight, tons of great ideas came pouring in ([“A Happy Ending to the Classroom Birthday Treat Dilemma”](#))!

That year I took two of my Lunch Tray readers' suggestions: sending in a white tee-shirt with a fabric marker so my daughter's classmates could sign it, as well as making a birthday donation in the name of the entire fifth grade class to a charity chosen by my daughter. It was a fun and meaningful way to mark the day. In this post, [“Food-Free Birthdays Can Be Hard, Even for the Manifesto Lady,”](#) I share how my son successfully celebrated one of his birthdays without food as well.

Apart from the many [creative suggestions](#) of my Lunch Tray readers, there are lots of inspiring lists of non-food birthday treats available online. Some of these treats will require your teacher's cooperation, such as letting your child choose the story to be read aloud that day, while others are things you can arrange or bring in on your own.

Here are a few of my favorite lists of non-food birthday treats:

- [Ten Food-Free Ways to Celebrate School Birthdays](#), from Real Mom Nutrition;
- Edgartown School's "[Ideas for Parents: Non-food Ideas for Birthday Celebrations at School](#);"
- Ohio Action for Healthy Kids, "[Ideas for Parents: Non-food Ideas for Birthday Celebrations at School](#);"
- My own [Pinterest board](#) of non-food birthday treats, to which I add new pins frequently.



Classroom Snacks

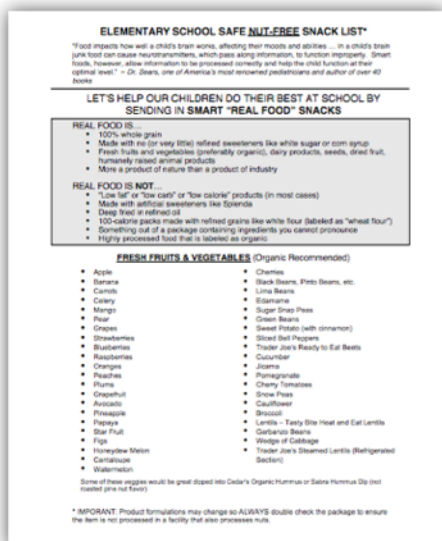
In this section, I'm combining the discussion of classroom-wide snacks brought in by fellow parents on a volunteer basis, as well as special foods and drinks given to children on standardized testing days.

In both cases, it's important to focus on *why* these snacks and drinks are being offered in the first place: to boost attention and performance, whether on a daily basis or for a test. So it may be quite persuasive to your teacher or principal to point out that giving kids sugary juice, candies – even [Mountain Dew!](#) -- before testing, or giving them sugary or highly-processed, low fiber white flour snacks during the school day, is actually counterproductive from that standpoint. It's true that these foods can give children a temporary burst of energy, but that rush is often followed by a “sugar crash” that leaves kids tired, irritable, unable to concentrate and harder to discipline.

But perhaps here, more than any other topic we've discussed in this guide, the general confusion surrounding “healthy” food becomes most problematic. That's because everyone recognizes sugary treats and rewards for what they are (even if we differ in our attitudes about feeding them to kids), but many people, thanks to misleading food industry health claims, regard highly-processed snack foods as wholesome and nutritious, even when they may not be. So just asking parents to send in “healthy” snacks for the class, or asking schools to

provide “healthy” attention-boosters on exam days, may not produce the results you expect.

That's why I love this two-page “real food” (and nut-free) [snack list](#) (pictured at left) from Lisa Leake at [100 Days of Real Food](#). It explains to parents in very simple terms what is meant by “real food” and then gives a comprehensive list, including brand names, to make shopping for healthy snacks easier.



And here are some other useful healthy school snack lists you can consult in helping your own school formulate a list of approved snacks:

- [The Busy Family's Guide to Healthy School Snacks](#), by [PEACHSF](#) (Parents, Educators & Advocates Connection for Healthy School Food);
- [Better School Food Healthy Snack List](#);
- [Healthy School Snacks](#) from the Montana Office of Public Instruction; and
- Action for Healthy Kids' [Healthy School Snacks](#)



How District Wellness Policies Fit In

Before you try to change your school's classroom food environment, it's important to know what, if anything, your district's wellness policy has to say about this issue.

What Is a Wellness Policy?

In 2004, the federal government mandated that all districts participating in the federal school lunch and/or breakfast program formulate a "wellness policy" to promote the health of students and address the growing problem of childhood obesity.

The wellness policy requirement was further strengthened in 2010 with the passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA), the same law which improved the nutritional quality of school meals and competitive foods. At the time of this writing, the USDA has recently issued – but not yet finalized – a set of [proposed rules](#) under the HHFKA which will make district wellness policies much more robust.

Where Do I Find My District's Wellness Policy?

Start by going to your district's website. The document might be kept there with other district policies or it might be in a special section devoted to your district's "SHAC" – "School (or "Student") Health Advisory Council (or "Committee"). Some wellness policies are easy to locate on the Internet, others aren't. If all else fails, call your district's offices and ask how you can get a copy.

Wellness Policies and Classroom Food

When it comes to classroom food, your district's existing wellness policy may or may not set out nutritional standards or other limits on what can be served. Many wellness policies written soon after the 2004 mandate are silent on the subject.

However, the USDA's new proposed rules, if adopted, would *affirmatively require* districts to set nutrition standards for foods and beverages made available to children on campus, *specifically including*

food at “classroom parties, classroom snacks brought by parents, or foods given as incentives on the school campus during the school day.”

On paper, that’s great news. However, each district will set those nutritional standards differently, depending on community norms, with some setting a lax standard and others calling for more stringent guidelines.

Will My District Use the Smart Snacks Rules to Govern Classroom Food?

Recently, the [Alliance for a Healthier Generation](#) issued a [model wellness policy](#) to meet the requirements of the new proposed rules and this model policy sets the “[Smart Snacks in School](#)” rules as a minimum standard for classroom food. Because the Smart Snacks rules create a convenient shorthand standard for wellness policy drafters and because they do represent a significant nutritional leap forward for competitive food, it’s possible that many districts will adopt this standard for classroom food as well.

Parents who prefer that their children eat only “real food,” however, need to understand that the Smart Snacks rules [do allow many highly processed snacks](#) like the ones on [this list](#) from PepsiCo. So, for example, whole grain-rich Oven Baked Flamin’ Hot Cheetos could be served at a class party and be in full compliance with any wellness policy using the Smart Snacks standard for classroom food. That said, under the Smart Snacks standards the very worst junk food – cupcakes, soda, candy, etc. -- could no longer be served in classrooms, even at parties.

Wellness Policies in Practice

If a district participating in federal school meal programs doesn’t have a wellness policy or isn’t following its provisions, it can be fined by the state agency which administers those meal programs (usually, the state’s Department of Education, but sometimes its Department of Agriculture). At present, though, it’s unrealistic to expect a state school food auditor to know if individual schools are complying with a district wellness policy. At most, he or she will usually just check a box

to indicate that a board-approved district policy is on file. Even worse, in many districts, parents, teachers and even principals may not be aware that a wellness policy exists, let alone what's required of them under it.

To address these limitations, the new proposed USDA wellness policy rules have much more robust reporting requirements, imposed on both individual schools and districts, to show how well they're meeting pre-determined and specific wellness goals. Ideally, these new reporting requirements will mean that principals will become more familiar with their district's wellness policy and will try to comply with it. That said, if wellness policy violations are happening at the individual classroom level, it's still unrealistic (in my opinion) to expect the state to issue penalties to enforce the policy.

That's why I included this section at the end of this guide rather than the start. On the one hand, your district's wellness policy can be very helpful. It articulates your district's wellness goals and can be cited as a persuasive document in the face of a teacher or principal who is unwilling to change the junk food status quo. On the other hand, if the wellness policy alone is *not* persuasive enough to move such decision-makers, you may have [some options for enforcement](#) but you'll likely still have to employ the strategies discussed in the preceding pages to bring about change.

In other words, a wellness policy is generally only as strong as its support within the school community.

How Will I Know When the New Rules Are Adopted and What They Say?

Subscribers to The Lunch Tray newsletter and readers of the blog will get all the latest updates on the new USDA wellness policy rules. In the interim, here is [general information](#) on wellness policies from the USDA, the [full text](#) of the proposed rules and a helpful [summary](#) of them.

How Can I Influence My Own District's Classroom Food Policy?

Call your district's offices and ask to be put in touch with someone on the district's SHAC ("School (or "Student") Health Advisory Council (or "Committee") or "District Wellness Committee." (Your district might use another name as well.) If there are openings on this committee, offer to join. Then you'll be an active participant in shaping the terms of the wellness policy and its enforcement in your community.

Can My School Set a Stricter Classroom Food Policy Than the District's?

Yes! If you feel there's support for it in your school, consider working with your principal to set up a school-based wellness committee to draft your own classroom food policy. Such a policy can't be more lax than your district's policy but it certainly can be more stringent.

School wellness committees are usually part of the PTA, although they can be free-standing as well, and they're empowered by the principal to create and monitor compliance with school-based wellness standards. In some districts, school-based wellness committees also send liaisons to the district's wellness committee meetings, which is an ideal way to foster communication between the two bodies.

Whether working on a district or school wellness committee, this [toolkit](#) from the Alliance for a Healthier Generation is likely to be very helpful to your group.

Conclusion

The intrusion of junk food into school classrooms is driven by many larger societal forces including:

- the billions of dollars spent on marketing by the food and beverage industries;
- a societal shift from preparing food at home to an increasing reliance on pre-packaged, convenience foods;
- classroom crowding, which may encourage teachers to use junk food to keep order; and
- even the rise of standardized testing in our schools under “No Child Left Behind.”

Those are all factors which are completely out of the control of individual parents. And, as noted earlier, some communities and schools are far more open to changing their junk food practices than others. So remember: getting junk food out of your classroom may be quite easy or it may be very difficult. But if you (and, we hope, other parents) don’t speak up, the status quo may never change.

As you embark on or continue your advocacy efforts, be patient, be kind to yourself and regard even small improvements as significant victories – because they are! And please do share your experiences – good and bad – on The Lunch Tray. There you’ll always find a community of like-minded, empathetic parents who’ll support you on this journey by offering their own successful strategies or a virtual shoulder to cry on as you regroup to try again another day.

I hope you found this guide useful! Please send any corrections or suggestions for future editions to: bettina@thelunchtray.com.

- Bettina



General Resources

The following is a list of websites, some of which are cited in these pages, where additional helpful information may be found:

[Action for Healthy Kids](#)

[Alliance for a Healthier Generation](#)

[Bag the Junk](#)

[Center for Science in the Public Interest](#)

[Healthy Classrooms Initiative](#)

[Kids' Safe and Healthful Food Project](#)

[Parents, Educators & Advocates Connection for Healthy School Food \(PEACHSF\)](#)

[Rudd 'Roots Parents](#) (UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity)

[School Wellness Policy Toolkit](#) (Alliance for a Healthier Generation)

The Lunch Tray's [Pinterest boards](#)

["Why school and junk food don't mix. And what educators can do about it"](#) (Spoonfed blog)